

# GRASSROOTS POLICY PROJECT

## Political Consciousness and Collective Action

Ideas (and worldview concepts) must be connected to action. Otherwise, they remain abstractions. We emphasize using worldview to inform action, and vice versa. The groups we work with exist to pursue issues and problems through different kinds of activities — direct action, lobbying, accountability sessions, electoral engagement, etc. Worldview can help them turn these activities into more deliberate strategies for expanding political possibilities. It can offer ways of linking issues and moving constituencies beyond their immediate concerns, toward embracing other issues. It becomes the way of moving beyond issues, to clarity about what we are fighting for, more broadly.

We can build upon the experiences and ideas that reside in popular culture and everyday life; we must provide spaces where people share their experiences and learn from one another; we also need to challenge people with new ideas, as well as new tools for analysis that can help them move from individual experience to collective analysis and shared worldview. New concepts must be close to peoples' experiences. And the seeds of new ideas and worldview can be found in popular wisdom.

Most of the time, people are pretty busy trying to get on with their daily lives, and they make rational choices about work, family, community and politics based on the options they see as viable. And, while they may resist injustices and unfair social arrangements in subtle ways, accommodating themselves to less-than-desirable conditions at work or in their community may seem like a better strategy than active and open resistance. This is especially true when people have little or no experience with collective action. For example, workers who are not organized and who have negative associations with unions will gravitate toward strategies of accommodation, while workers who've experienced the power of collective bargaining through a union may be more inclined toward collective action.

### Elements of Collective Action

So many things in our society discourage collective action and civic engagement: the disconnect between our public and our private lives, our tendencies to seek

self-fulfillment through private endeavors, combined with limited opportunities for engaging in collective decision-making in our daily lives. Given the pervasiveness of isolation, individualism and cynicism about politics, what kinds of ideas, analysis, experiences and interactions would encourage people to engage in collective action? Looking at movements and campaigns throughout U.S. history a few conditions seem to stand out. We summarize them here as three 'ingredients' that encourage collective action, when they are combined: **Injustice**, **Identity** and **Capacity**.

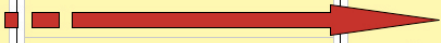


We can use these three ingredients, or elements, as reference points as we develop frames for our issues and organizing strategies:

<b>Injustice</b>	•Understanding the causes or sources of a problem.
	•Seeing the problem in the context of human-created realities, meaning the problem is not natural. Social problems can be changed by people acting together.
<b>Identity</b>	•An identification and solidarity with an "us" that is injured by the injustice perpetuated by a "them."
	•A heartfelt connection with the issues and interests at stake.
<b>Capacity (or a sense of agency).</b>	•A sense that we can do something to create a change.
	•The confidence to move beyond passivity and despair into purposeful action.

Over time, we want to expand people's understanding and involvement beyond the initial concerns that motivated them to take action. To help us develop this kind of critical consciousness, we can expand and deepen each of the 3 collective action ingredients through our work with groups, moving them:

- I From Injustice to ANALYSIS: We want to build from people's narrower sense of injustice toward a broader understanding of interconnected, systemic injustices.
- I From Identity to SOLIDARITY: We want people to feel solidarity and common cause with others struggling for justice and change.

- I From Capacity to POWER: We want people to develop leadership, deepen commitment to organizational and movement politics, and experience the power of collective action.

<b>From Injustice</b>	 <p>We want to build from people's narrower sense of injustice toward a broader understanding of interconnected, systemic injustices.</p>	<b>to Analysis</b>
<b>From Identity</b>	 <p>We want people to feel solidarity and common cause with others struggling for justice and change.</p>	<b>to Solidarity</b>
<b>From Capacity</b>	 <p>We want people to develop leadership, deepen commitment to organizational and movement politics, and experience the power of collective action.</p>	<b>to Power</b>

A sense of justice combined with political analysis is the basis for the kind of sustained and informed political participation that is necessary to confront powerful interests, hold officials accountable and start to shift the balance of power in society. We can think of this as putting together the ingredients for collective action: a sense of injustice, a sense of solidarity with those who experience the injustice, and a sense that something can be done about it.

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This overview is loosely based on the writings of William Gamson on collective action. We recommend "Talking Politics." Cambridge University Press: 1992.